

## Lekh Lekha 5773 Social Media: Witnessing God's Presence

Shabbat Shalom.

Maybe it's the elections and all these polls that we can track at almost any instant, but I have to say that I am loving these surveys I have been doing on Shabbat mornings.

So, this morning, let's do a technology survey.

How many people here have email accounts and use them? How many of you have smart phones? How many of you watch videos on YouTube? How many of you are on Facebook? Twitter?

Well, last Thursday around 10 PM, after a long day, I sat down to write my sermon. Facebook was open on my laptop, so I posted: "Time to think of a sermon." Almost immediately, I received dozens of replies with all kinds of wonderful ideas and topics. I responded and there was a sort of group-sermon-strategizing seminar with members of our shul and friends and colleagues of mine outside of our community joining in.

I have to say it was pretty neat. When I wrote the sermon, I utilized some of those ideas. Although when I actually posted it to Facebook, I received far fewer comments – perhaps because of the timing (I did it right before Shabbat versus late Thursday night when many folks were on-line), but it was still interesting to note the difference.

This week I was up a number of times early in the morning when I was fortunate to watch gorgeous sunrises. On Thursday morning, I was on an Amtrak train when the sun pierced the sky. It was spectacular – rays of gold severed the horizon over the waterways on the New England coastline, creating a breathtaking scene over the Fall foliage. Even some normally staid and seemingly jaded business travelers had to take out their smart phones to take pictures of this moment.

I followed suit and posted the sunrise to Facebook and Twitter for others to enjoy, along with the *brakhah*, the blessing for witnessing sunrises or other magical moments in nature and *Oseh Ma'aseh Vereisheet* – Praised are You Adonai, Ruler of the Universe Who continually renews the act of Creation.

Strangely enough, it happened again yesterday; the sun rose. This time, however, I was in our *minyán*, the sun peeking through the trees behind our shul to the East. For me, there are few things quite as moving as hitting the morning *amidah* right as the sun breaks the horizon – that is the moment of *Shaharit* – which comes from the word *shahar*, meaning: dawn.



Both of the experiences left me not merely with a spiritual feeling, a feeling of nature propelling me to sense God's presence, but with a profound sense of being an *eid l'Adonai* – a witness for God. As we read in the *haftarah* two weeks ago, God calls on us: *atem eidai* – you are My witnesses. We are supposed to look for God's presence in the world.

But what does that mean? What does it mean to be God's witnesses? What does it mean to witness God?

In order to think about this question, let's first think about places in the Torah where people become aware of God.

What comes to mind?

Well, there is Jacob's dream of a ladder. When he wakes up, he states: "*Akhen yeish Adonai baMakom hezeh V'anokhi lo yadati* – Wow, God is present in this place and I did not know it!" (Gen 28:16)

There is Moses and the burning bush; there is Sinai; there is Moshe seeing God pass by him from the cleft in the rock.

But what about a moment in this week's *parashah*? Is God witnessed in this week's *parashah*?

To answer that, let's first look at the question Josh thoughtfully asked in his *d'var Torah*: why does God expect Abraham to listen to him? Josh brought the wonderful Midrash of Abraham smashing his father's idols, proving that they are not deserving of worship. This Midrash teaches us that Abraham already realized that idolatry was not the true path.

In a similar vein, there is another text, an interpretation that tries to answer why God chose Abram or Avram to be the spiritual ancestor of the Jewish people. This text claims that it was Avram who chose, or rather discovered, God's presence.

It comes to us from the Book of Jubilees, a Hebrew text written around the year 100 BCE that did not make the cut; it is not found in the Tanakh – in the Hebrew Bible.

This wonderful text relates that Avram sat one night and looked into the dark, desert sky. He was looking at the stars to see what the coming year would be like: would it rain enough? Would they have enough to eat? It was an ancient form of astrology that everyone believed in.

But something happened to him that night. Avram became aware of God's presence. Perhaps it was because he was alone, perhaps because it was *Rosh Hodesh*, the New Moon when the moon is not visible in the sky, but the stars seem much brighter; perhaps it was because he witnessed so many shooting stars streaking over the heavens. Who knows exactly how, but he became aware of God. The stars do not control the world a la astrology, but there is one force that lies above, behind and within all things.

It's a great text because it is Avram who "discovers" God, and that makes God discover him, calling him to go on the "*lekh lekha*" journey.

His staring at the desert sky makes him aware of God's presence; he literally witnesses something in nature and that make him a witness to God. That is the first half of "*atem eidai*" you are My witnesses. We witness God by experiencing magnificent moments in nature: that spectacular sunrise, the expanse of the heavens, the openness of the ocean and the majesty of the mountains.

But "*atem eidai*" means something else as well. To be witnesses to something is to testify to its power and even to help spread its message. If I am witness to an event, it means that not only did I see it, but that I was also moved by it, moving me to action.

In our tradition, that means we are called to live lives guided by God's Torah. To be witnesses for God is not merely to become aware of God's presence in moments in nature or sublime encounters with others, but to become advocates for God in our world.

And as Jews, we do that by performing God's *mitzvot*, living lives filled with God's commandments, which help us refine ourselves and perfect the world.

Avram was not only a witness to God in nature, but was moved to action. In this week's *parashah*, he goes on a journey to bring God and God's ideas into the world. He saves his nephew Lot. Next week, we will read about how he argues with God about destroying *S'dom* and *Amora* and how he welcomes guests into his home.

Our rabbis expand on this and see him and his wife Sarah as gracious hosts who invited guests into their home and taught them about God, guiding people into the Jewish spiritual tradition.

Expanding on the words in our reading that Abraham shall be a blessing to others, the Midrash states:

"R. Levi said: No man ever priced a cow belonging to Abraham [in order to buy it] without becoming blessed, nor did a man ever price a cow [to sell] to him without his becoming blessed. Abraham used to pray for barren women, and they were remembered [i.e. they conceived]; and on behalf of the sick, and they were healed. R. Huna said: It was not necessary for Abraham to go to the sick person, for when the sick person merely saw him he was relieved. R. Hanina said: Even ships travelling the sea were saved for Abraham's sake. (Genesis Rabbah 39:11) Such was Abraham's goodness and blessing that it transformed all those who came into his presence.

Similarly, a contemporary Hasidic text, the *Netivot Shalom*, by the Slonimer rebbe, Rabbi Shalom Noach Berezovsky, offers a compelling insight on this based on this week's Torah reading and the idea that God created the world on the quality of *hesed*, of love.

He states that the goal of serving God [of witnessing God] is to love God, as we say in the *Sh'ma*. "This applies both to the physical and the spiritual realms.... [... How do we do this? By walking in God's ways, which means to emulate God. As the

Midrash (*Sifrei, Ekev 13*) teaches:] “just as God is called ‘Compassionate,’ so you be compassionate; just as God is ‘Merciful,’ so you be merciful; just as God is ‘Slow to Anger,’ you be slow to anger.”

[...]

“Now we can understand how the conclusion of the verse ‘and you shall be a blessing’ refers particularly to Abraham.... The epitome of the quality of *hesed* is to actually become a blessing. Abraham did not merely engage in acts of *hesed*, his whole existence and being were love and compassion.”

[...]

“Further, pay close attention to the language of the [Midrash] (*Sifrei*): ‘Just as God is compassionate/merciful so you be compassionate/merciful’ - do not only perform acts of compassion and mercy, but transform your whole being into the essence of compassion and mercy....”

[...]

In other words, “someone whose whole being is *hesed* is always compassionate and merciful in potential; even if she is not able to help another person, she still feels the other’s heart, living in connection to both his joy and pain. This is the significance of the phrase ‘and you shall be a blessing:’ become *hesed* completely, in your essence, not only through enacting it, but let your whole being be *hesed*....”

My teacher, Rabbi Jonathan Slater comments:

“R. Shalom Noach sets a high bar: to transform ourselves in our essence to love. He is clear that what is required is ‘herculean,’ in the sense that it has been accomplished only by our ‘mythical’ heroes, and so may not be attainable. Yet, the obligation to try still rests on us.

[...]

“Each choice against our ‘natural’ inclination could be considered *mesirut nefesh*, truly giving of our self for God. Similarly, in any moment we can ask: am I seeking my comfort, my desires, my sensibilities over serving the other, my fellow? Each choice we make against our selfish, self-centered, self-oriented inclination for the sake of the other could be another form of *mesirut nephesh*.

“This is the route that R. Shalom Noach suggests Abraham took to become the paragon of *hesed*.”

Rabbi Slater suggests a daily practice: allow love to truly come in – feel it deep within your soul – that sense of being safe, happy, strong, at ease. Once you are grounded in that feeling, then you can turn your heart toward others more deeply – both to those close to you and those further away, even to those with whom you may have some contention. While this may be a life’s work, we engage in it each day.

So, the Hasidic tradition offers us a wonderful idea – when God’s love flows right through us, it can transform us and how we exist in the world, allowing more of God’s love to flow into the world.

So, the next time you or I post a beautiful sunrise on Facebook, let’s not only enjoy it and smile and feel God’s presence, but let that love flow right into our hearts and into our hands to transform the world. Then we will truly be God’s witnesses.

Shabbat Shalom.